

Frequently Asked Questions on Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed Sea Turtle and Smalltooth Sawfish Release Protocol for Commercial and For-hire Gulf of Mexico Permitted Reef Fish Vessels

ESA-listed sea turtles and smalltooth sawfish can be injured or killed as a result of being mishandled when caught. NOAA Fisheries Service's Southeast Regional Office has identified ways to reduce the stress for hook and line caught and released sea turtles and smalltooth sawfish. These measures, if followed, can increase the chance of survival for these species.

Part of the proposed rule for Amendment 18A to the Fishery Management Plan for the Reef Fish Resources of the Gulf of Mexico would require sea turtle release gear and sea turtle and smalltooth sawfish release protocol documentation on commercial and for-hire reef fish permitted vessels. This requirement was developed by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council and is currently in the review process of NOAA Fisheries Service. Comments on the sea turtle and smalltooth sawfish release protocols, as well as other aspects of the proposed rule, are being solicited. For information on how to submit comments, see [Fishery Bulletin FB06-022](#).

Who needs sea turtle release gear onboard their vessel?

Turtle release gear will be required on all vessels with commercial and for-hire reef fish vessel permits in the Gulf of Mexico. This includes between 1,100 and 1,200 commercial reef fish vessels and between 1,500 and 1,600 for-hire reef fish vessels, some of which also have commercial reef fish permits.

When will the ESA-listed sea turtle and smalltooth sawfish release protocol become mandatory?

Vessels with commercial and for-hire reef fish permits will be required to have the proper equipment and protocols onboard 30 days after the final rule implementing these protocols goes into effect. This protocol must be posted at all times inside the wheelhouse, or in an easily viewable area if the vessel has no wheelhouse.

What specific release gear is required?

A permitted vessel with a freeboard height of four feet or less must have on board a:

- Dipnet
- Short handled dehooker
- Long-nose or needle-nose pliers
- Bolt cutters
- Monofilament line cutters
- At least two types of mouth openers/mouth gags.

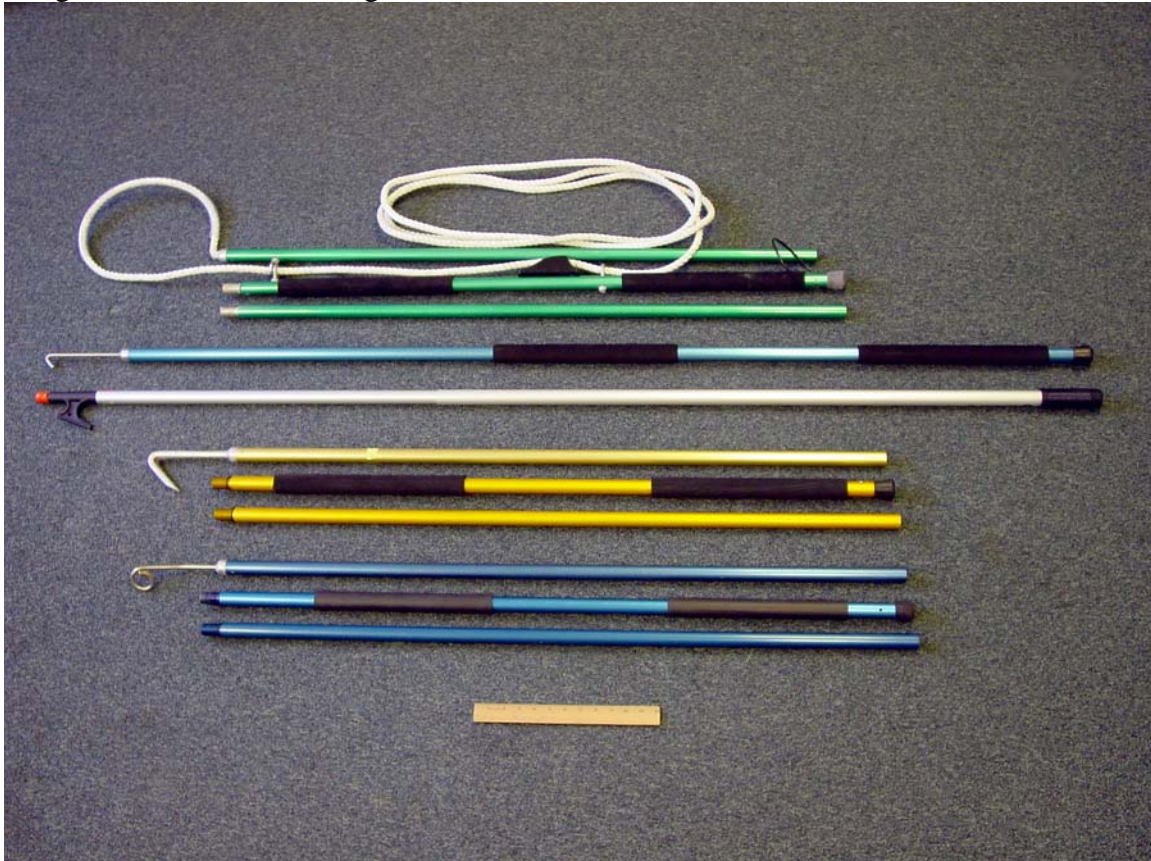
A permitted vessel with a freeboard height of greater than four feet must have on board a:

- Dipnet
- Long-handled line clipper
- Short-handled and a long-handled dehooker
- Long-nose or needle-nose pliers

- Bolt cutters
- Monofilament line cutters
- At least two types of mouth openers/mouth gags.

All vessels, regardless of freeboard, also need an auto tire or some other cushioned surface to rest a sea turtle on if it is boated. Other cushioned surfaces include life rings, seat cushions, life jackets, or life vests.

Long-handled turtle release gear



How much will this gear cost and where can I get it?

The total cost for release gear for a vessel is estimated to cost between \$267 and \$459. However, these costs may be less for some vessels because they may already have some of the equipment aboard. For example, life rings and life vests are already required items for vessels. Additionally, descriptions of turtle release gear and a list of NOAA Fisheries Service-approved gear can be found in the final rule implementing sea turtle bycatch and bycatch mortality mitigation measures for Atlantic pelagic longline vessels (69 FR 40734).

How do I release a sea turtle that is hooked or entangled with my gear?

Vessels with commercial and for-hire reef fish vessel permits must possess and the crew must use approved sea turtle handling and release gear in compliance with NOAA

Fisheries Service careful release protocols. The required handling and release gear are fully described in a document entitled "[Careful Release Protocols for Sea Turtle Release with Minimal Injury](#)." Also, there must be sea turtle handling and release guidelines (provided by NOAA Fisheries Service) posted inside the wheelhouse, or in an easily viewable area if the vessel has no wheelhouse.

When should I boat a sea turtle?

A sea turtle should not be boated if it is too large to safely be brought onto the vessel, or if sea conditions prevent the turtle from being safely boated. Turtles should be boated using a NOAA Fisheries Service approved dipnet and not pulled into the vessel using the line the turtle has been caught with. Pulling on the line could cause serious injury to the turtle, particularly if the turtle has swallowed the hook. Handling the turtle once boated should follow procedures provided in the document "Careful Release Protocols for Sea Turtle Release with Minimal Injury."

What do I do if I encounter a dead sea turtle in my gear?

If a sea turtle dies from gear interaction, the animal should be released or removed from the gear as if it were alive. The sea turtle should not be kept onboard.

What if I catch a smalltooth sawfish?

Smalltooth sawfish should be released by keeping the fish in the water and cutting the line as close to the hook as possible. If it can be done safely, untangle the line if it is wrapped around the saw. Do not handle the animal or attempt to remove any hooks on the saw, except for with a long-handled dehooker.

Who do I contact to get more information on sea turtle and smalltooth sawfish release protocols?

Contact the Sustainable Fisheries Division, Southeast Regional Office, St. Petersburg, Florida; phone: (727) 824-5305; fax: (727) 824-5308.